

Notes on Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street by Herman Melville:

SUMMARY

The narrator of "Bartleby the Scrivener" is the Lawyer, who runs a law practice on Wall Street in New York. The Lawyer begins by noting that he is an "elderly man," and that his profession has brought him "into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men the law-copyists, or scriveners." While the Lawyer knows many interesting stories of such scriveners, he bypasses them all in favor of telling the story of Bartleby, whom he finds to be the most interesting of all the scriveners. Bartleby is, according to the Lawyer, "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those were very small."

Before introducing Bartleby, the Lawyer describes the other scriveners working in his office at this time. The first is Turkey, a man who is about the same age as the Lawyer (around sixty). Turkey has been causing problems lately. He is an excellent scrivener in the morning, but as the day wears on—particularly in the afternoon—he becomes more prone to making mistakes, dropping ink plots on the copies he writes. He also becomes more flushed, with an ill temper, in the afternoon. The Lawyer tries to help both himself and Turkey by asking Turkey only to work in the mornings, but Turkey argues with him, so the Lawyer simply gives him less important documents in the afternoon.

The second worker is Nippers, who is much younger and more ambitious than Turkey. At twenty-five years old, he is a comical opposite to Turkey, because he has trouble working in the morning. Until lunchtime, he suffers from stomach trouble, and constantly adjusts the height of the legs on his desk, trying to get them perfectly balanced. In the afternoons, he is calmer and works steadily.

The last employee—not a scrivener, but an errand-boy—is Ginger Nut. His nickname comes from the fact that Turkey and Nippers often send him to pick up ginger nut cakes for them.

The Lawyer spends some time describing the habits of these men and then introduces Bartleby. Bartleby comes to the office to answer an ad placed by the Lawyer, who at that time needed more help. The Lawyer hires Bartleby and gives him a space in the office. At first, Bartleby seems to be an excellent worker. He writes day and night, often by no more than candlelight. His output is enormous, and he greatly pleases the Lawyer.

One day, the Lawyer has a small document he needs examined. He calls Bartleby in to do the job, but Bartleby responds: "I would prefer not to." This answer amazes the Lawyer, who has a "natural expectancy of instant compliance." He is so amazed by this response, and the calm way Bartleby says it, that he cannot even bring himself to scold Bartleby. Instead, he calls in Nippers to examine the document instead.

Analysis

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is one of Melville's most famous stories. It is also one of the most difficult to interpret. For decades, critics have argued over numerous interpretations of the story. The plot is deceptively simple. The Lawyer, a well-established man of sixty working on Wall Street, hires a copyist—seemingly no different from any other copyist, though the Lawyer is

well-accustomed to quirky copyists. But Bartleby is different. Bartleby's initial response of "I would prefer not to," seems innocent at first, but soon it becomes a mantra, a slogan that is an essential part of Bartleby's character. It is, as the Lawyer points out, a form of "passive resistance."

Bartleby's quiet, polite, but firm refusal to do even the most routine tasks asked of him has always been the main source of puzzlement. Bartleby has been compared to philosophers ranging from Cicero, whose bust rests a few inches above the Lawyer's head in his office, to Mahatma Gandhi. His refusal of the Lawyer's requests has been read as a critique of the growing materialism of American culture at this time. It is significant that the Lawyer's office is on Wall Street; in fact, the subtitle of "Bartleby" is "A Story of Wall Street." Wall Street was at this time becoming the hub of financial activity in the United States, and Melville (as well as other authors, including Edgar Allan Poe) were quick to note the emerging importance of money and its management in American life. Under this reading, Bartleby's stubborn refusal to do what is asked of him amounts to a kind of heroic opposition to economic control.

But if this interpretation is correct—if Melville intended such a reading—it seems to be an extremely subtle theme, since the Lawyer never really contemplates Bartleby's refusal to be a working member of society. He is simply amazed by Bartleby's refusal to do anything, even eat, it seems, or find a place to live. Throughout the story, Bartleby simply exists; he does do some writing, but eventually he even gives that up in favor of staring at the wall. There are many more interpretations of Bartleby and the story, which will be discussed in the next section. It is important to note the other characters in the story, as well as Melville's style.

Aside from the Lawyer and Bartleby, the only other characters in the story are Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut. Turkey and Nippers are the most important. Neither of their nicknames appears to really fit their character. Turkey does not seem to resemble a turkey in any way, unless his wrinkled skin, perhaps turned red when he has one of his characteristic fits, makes him look like he has a turkey's neck. Nippers might be so named because he is ill-tempered and "nippy" in the morning, but this too seems like a rather glib interpretation. Melville seems to have named the characters in a way that makes them memorable, but in a way that also alienates them somewhat; by refusing to give them real names, Melville emphasizes the fact that they can easily be defined by their function, behavior or appearance—each is just another nameless worker.

Turkey and Nippers are also reminiscent of nursery rhyme or fairy tale characters, partially due to their strange names, but also in the way their behavior complements one another. Turkey is a good worker in the morning, while Nippers grumbles over a sour stomach and plays with his desk. In the afternoon, Turkey is red-faced and angry, making blots on his copies, while Nippers works quietly and diligently. As the Lawyer points out, they relieve each other like guards. They are the Tweedledee and Tweedledum of the Wall Street world.

Some critics have proposed that the Lawyer is a "collector" of sorts; that is, he collects "characters" in the form of strange scribes: "I have known very many of them and, if I pleased, could relate [diverse] histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep." Bartleby, then, is the "prize" of the Lawyer's collection, the finest tale: the Lawyer says, "I waive the biographies of all other scribes for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of." Under this reading, the Lawyer seems a little cold in his recollection—as if Bartleby were no more than an

interesting specimen of an insect. The role of the Lawyer is just one of the many hotly debated aspects of the story. Of particular interest is the question of whether the Lawyer is ultimately a friend or foe to Bartleby. His treatment of Bartleby can be read both as sympathetic, pitying, or cold, depending on one's interpretation. Some readers simply resign themselves to the fact that nothing in Melville is set in such black-and-white terms.

SUMMARY

The Lawyer, the narrator of the story, has already been surprised once before by Bartleby's refusal to examine a document, as all scribes (law- copyists) are required to do. Bartleby said he would "prefer not to," and the Lawyer was so surprised that he hadn't argued with him.

A few days after this incident, there is a large document (already copied by Bartleby) to be examined. The Lawyer calls in all his employees—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—to work on the examination. But when he calls Bartleby to assist as well, the scrivener again replies that he "would prefer not to." The Lawyer presses him, wanting to know why he refuses, but Bartleby can only reply that he would "prefer not to." The Lawyer tells us that something in Bartleby's nature "disarmed him," and Bartleby's steadfast refusal to do what was asked of him confounds the Lawyer. Momentarily, the Lawyer wonders if it is he who is wrong, and he asks his other copyists who was in the right. All three agree that Bartleby is being unreasonable, if not downright impertinent. The Lawyer tries one last time to get Bartleby to examine the document, but business hurries him and he and his workers examine the document without Bartleby, though the other scribes mutter that they won't examine another man's document without pay ever again.

The Lawyer has now become fascinated by Bartleby, and watches him closely. He never sees Bartleby enter or leave the office; he seems to always be there. He never leaves for lunch or tea, but simply has Ginger Nut deliver him snacks all day. Though the Lawyer admits that "nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance," he eventually comes to pity Bartleby, believing that he "intends no mischief" and his "eccentricities are involuntary." The Lawyer decides to "cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval" by determining to keep Bartleby on his staff as something like a charity case. If Bartleby were to be employed by someone else, the Lawyer is certain he would be ill-treated.

Bartleby again prefers not to examine his papers, and Turkey becomes enraged by it, threatening to beat up his reluctant fellow scrivener. The Lawyer tries another tact, asking Bartleby to run down to the post office for him, but again: "I would prefer not to." The result is that Bartleby continues on at the chambers for some time doing nothing but copying, while the Lawyer pays Nippers and Turkey to examine his work.

ANALYSIS

Before discussing some of the themes of "Bartleby the Scrivener," it is important to note Melville's style. Melville had a unique gift for description and contemplation in his writing, and his short stories (and many of his novels) unfold very slowly and thoughtfully. This was not a style unique to Melville; his good friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter*, had a similar writing style. Melville's narrator, the Lawyer, slowly unfolds the events of the story, taking his time to provide small details that better set the scene or highlight a character. For instance,

early in the story the Lawyer tells the reader that he once gave his scrivener Turkey a coat, and that Turkey became very protective of it, and even a little egotistical about having it.

But even more significant than this level of detail is Melville's pacing. Like films and music, stories can be paced, and Melville is a very methodical writer. His stories are generally paced very slowly, though they often have one or two scenes of intense action (for instance, the escape of Don Benito in "Benito Cereno," or the last few chapters of *Moby Dick*). Usually, these intense scenes serve as a climax or a revelation to all that has occurred before it. In "Bartleby," this action occurs in the rapid imprisonment, decline and death of Bartleby, all in the space of about three pages (the exact climax is probably when the Lawyer, after confronting Bartleby on the banister, is refused for the last time, and leaves Bartleby to be taken to prison). Though Bartleby's imprisonment and death seem like an inevitable conclusion to this sad tale, the speed with which it all occurs makes it seem like an afterthought, as if it isn't that important. By making his climax and falling action so swift, Melville forces the reader to be more considerate of everything leading up to it.

As mentioned in the previous section, "Bartleby" is one of the most complex stories ever written by Melville, and perhaps by any American writer of the period. There is little agreement among critics as to how it should be interpreted. It was extraordinarily ahead of its time, dealing with issues such as the rise of middle-class job dissatisfaction and depression, as well as realizing the future significance of Wall Street to American life. Yet it is also a deeply symbolic work; there are few, if any, real-life Bartleby's, telling their employers they would "prefer not" to do something, yet remaining at that place of business.

One popular strategy has been to approach the story from a biographical standpoint. When he published "Bartleby" in 1853, Melville had just come off the dismal failure of *Moby Dick* in the marketplace (the book wouldn't become a "classic" until it was rediscovered by critics nearly half a century after its publication, and years after Melville's death). Melville had had enormous success with his earliest books, such as *Typee* and *Omoo*—books that dealt with his experiences on the high seas and on various islands. These books were not nearly as contemplative or stylistic as *Moby Dick*. Melville knew such stories would sell, but he "preferred" to write stories more similar to *Moby Dick*. Under this interpretation, the Lawyer represents the ordinary reader, who desires that Melville continue "copying" his earlier works, while Melville, pained by the failure of *Moby Dick*, replies that he would "prefer not to," and finally stops writing entirely. The "dead letters," therefore, are Melville's shunned novels. This is a very brief version of the biographical interpretation of "Bartleby," and it is by no means the "right" interpretation—there is probably no such thing as a "right" interpretation—but it does give some insight into the themes of "Bartleby."